

women. Sexual intercourse between a white woman and a man possessing one drop of black blood contaminated white blood, a process referred to as “amalgamation” and “mongrelization.” Fears spread of the threat posed by the mulatto class to the racial foundations of the southern order. Mulattoes blurred the color line dividing whites and blacks, permitting some mulattoes to “pass” as whites. White men argued that a white woman would never willfully engage in intercourse with an African-American man. Therefore, the threat lay in either the mulatto or the black beast rapist; given the difficulty of identifying mulattoes, white men concentrated on the black beast rapist.² Southern newspapers circulated accounts of black-on-white rape, particularly those cases that ended in the lynching of the black suspect by a white mob. As reports spread, whites, convinced of the black man’s guilt, searched for evidence of black lust for white women within their own communities.³

Poor white women were believed to be most vulnerable to the black rapist. At the August 1897 meeting of the Georgia State Agricultural Society, Rebecca Latimer Felton criticized white men for their failure to preserve the color line and protect poor white farm women from black “beasts.” Felton offered two means by which to protect poor white women. First, she advocated the development of a common school system to educate the poorer classes. She believed that education offered the tool necessary to avoid sexual encounters with black “beasts” and preserve white civilization. Second, Felton declared, “if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravaging human beasts – then I say lynch a thousand times if necessary.”⁴ Felton’s address attracted the attention of newspaper editors throughout the country, but their coverage focused on her support of lynching.

The emphasis that Felton and the southern white press placed upon the relationship between rape and lynching concealed the fact that many African-American lynching victims were not accused of rape. Such rhetoric legitimized the violent punishment of any transgression against white mastery. African-American men drew the wrath of white mobs, in part, for economic and political gains, particularly when those gains placed black men in positions of authority over white women. As historian Stephen Kantrowitz has noted, “since control over a household and its dependents formed the basis of white men’s claim to independence and citizenship, dominance could not be neatly separated into spheres of ‘government’ and ‘household.’”⁵ White men became apprehensive of the success of black men, interpreting any gains as steps toward black mastery over white dependents and sexual mastery over white

² Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, pg. 119-124; Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), pg. 99, 103; Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, pg. 216. Andrea Meryl Kirshenbaum notes the gendered concept of civilization in the political cartoons featured in the *Raleigh News and Observer*. In “‘The Vampire that Hovers Over North Carolina’: Gender, White Supremacy, and the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898,” *Southern Cultures* 4 (1998): pg. 17. In 1902, Thomas Dixon expressed these fears in absolute and dire terms in his best-selling novel, *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden, 1865-1900*. Dixon repeatedly declared, “[T]he future American must be either an Anglo Saxon or a Mulatto” (pg. 333).

³ Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pg. 240-241, 243.

⁴ Macon *Telegraph*, August 18, 1897; See also LeeAnn Whites, “Love, Hate, Rape, Lynching: Rebecca Latimer Felton and the Gender Politics of Racial Violence,” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. by David Cecelski and Timothy Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998): pg. 143-162.

⁵ Sommerville, *Rape and Race*, pg. 201-202; Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pg. 105; LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pg. 7.